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Intelligence Was Slow To Respond

By Michael Getler
Washington Post Staff Writer

More than nine hours passed after telltale signs began appearing in Moscow that Soviet President Yuri Andropov might be dead before the first intelligence reports of those signs reached government offices here Thursday night, according to diplomats and intelligence officials.

The reports coming through U.S. government channels lagged several hours behind a story filed from Moscow by a journalist who noticed sudden changes in television and radio programming and, by walking the streets of the Soviet capital, noticed signs of unusual late-night activity in government buildings.

While it is not unusual for intelligence agencies and governments to get their first bit of information from news reports, interviews yesterday with a number of officials made clear that there was concern and some finger-pointing within the government over an apparent lack of alertness by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and other intelligence monitors to such a crucial development.

In a dispatch that reached the desk of The Washington Post about 7 p.m. Washington time Thursday and was published in yesterday morning's newspaper, Moscow correspondent Dusko Doder wrote that Soviet television and radio had suddenly switched from jazz to classical music programs.

After walking through the city, Doder also reported an unusual number of lights on at midnight at the headquarters of the KGB, the Soviet secret police, and at the military and defense ministries.

These signs "appeared to indicate that the country was being placed on an emergency footing," he reported, comparing them to similar visible changes just before it was announced in November, 1982, that Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev had died.

The unusual activity in Moscow Thursday night came against the backdrop of Andropov's known long illness and reports earlier in the day

that his son, Igor, had left his post with a Soviet delegation at a conference in Stockholm to return to Moscow.

Soon after Doder's dispatch arrived, reporters here called officials at the White House, the State Department, the CIA and other agencies to ask if more detailed information had been reported to official Washington from Moscow.

All of the officials said they had seen no such reports. After checking further, the officials called back at about 8 p.m. to say they had no information about any programming changes or other telltale signs in Moscow. These further checks—based on knowledge of the still-to-be-published Doder story—were said to include inquiries elsewhere in the U.S. intelligence community, with the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and with the British Broadcasting Corp.

Officials said the CIA reportedly relies on the BBC and the U.S. government's Foreign Broadcast Intercept Service (FBIS) for monitoring of Soviet broadcasts. It is not clear whether intelligence officials checked with the BBC directly in Moscow Thursday night or just checked their broadcasts and schedules.

Yesterday, after Andropov's death was formally announced, the officials contacted Thursday night told a Post reporter that, in the words of one, "you scooped us all."

They said that after details of Doder's story were relayed from officials here to the American operatives in Moscow, the first reports through government channels about the changes in musical programming arrived in Washington sometime after 9 p.m. Thursday—about nine hours after they began on Soviet television.

Soviet television switched from jazz to classical music at about 8:15 p.m. Moscow time—15 minutes past noon in Washington. Soviet radio made the same change at 11:35 p.m. Moscow time—3:35 p.m. in Washington.

One source said that when the basic elements of Doder's still unpublished story were "played back" to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow on Thursday night, Washington time, embassy officials reportedly joked that the reporter must be "on pot."

"Don't they listen to the radio or walk around?" a government official here wondered yesterday, referring to

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